



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**DEVELOPMENT OF AN IMMUNOCONTRACEPTIVE VACCINE FOR
BIOCONTROL OF RATS**

LAI KIT YEE

FPV 2004 5

**DEVELOPMENT OF AN IMMUNOCONTRACEPTIVE VACCINE FOR
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By

LAI KIT YEE

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2004



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chairman: Professor Mohd. Azmi Mohd. Lila, Ph.D.

Faculty: Veterinary Medicine

Zona pellucida (ZP) is an extracellular matrix that surrounds the mammalian oocyte. The rat ZP is composed of three major glycoproteins: ZP1, ZP2 and ZP3. As a primary sperm receptor, ZP3 has been utilised as an immunogen to prevent fertilisation of the ovum. Unfortunately, the availability of ZP3 protein is always limited and purified protein is not available. DNA vaccination is therefore an excellent alternative.

ZP3 cDNA was amplified from *R. rattus diardii* ovary as a first step towards the development of ZP3-based DNA vaccine. The ZP3 gene has an open reading frame of 1272 nucleotides encoding a polypeptide of 424 amino acid residues which shares 87% identity with mouse homologue. The anti-fertility polynucleotide vaccine was generated by placing ZP3 gene into a mammalian plasmid expression vector. Plasmid containing the entire ZP3 gene sequence was designated pcDNA/1300. Meanwhile, constructs pcDNA/720 and pcDNA/580 comprised partial ZP3 gene encoding the N-terminal and C-terminal half of the protein respectively. *In vitro*

transfection of mammalian cells with these plasmids DNA led to their cytosolic expression. Sperms were attracted and bound to cells harbouring pcDNA/1300 and pcDNA/580 because these two constructs encoded the sperm-combining sites of ZP3.

Administration of these DNA vaccines resulted *in vivo* expression of ZP3 protein, which in turn stimulates specific cellular and humoral immune responses directed against self-ZP3 protein bearing cells or oocytes. Lacking or destruction of such cells resulted in an effective contraception in female animals. The ovarian dysfunction was characterised by excessive depletion of follicles and an increase in the number of oocyte-free cell clusters. The integrity of most follicles was challenged, as it was significantly infiltrated by immune cells. These ZP3 specific immune cells were shown to be a mixture of CD4+ and CD8+ T-lymphocytes subsets. Alterations in ovarian function were also evidenced when vaccinated animals were no longer sensitive to an intensive exogenous hormonal (hCG) treatment. Among the three constructs, pcDNA/1300 is the most effective contraceptive vaccine followed by pcDNA/580. The reduction in average litter size achieved by pcDNA/1300 was >90%. It is an excellent irreversible contraceptive vaccine as none of the vaccinated rats showed signs of recovery after three injections. In contrast, rats vaccinated with pcDNA/580 regained fertility over an extended period. On the other hand, vaccination with pcDNA/720 construct has no significant impact on rat fertility. Hence, special attention was given to pcDNA/1300.

In DNA vaccination, the role of cell-mediated immune response was pre-eminent as the titre of ZP3-antibody produced was significantly low. Relatively, vaccination

with recombinant ZP3 protein expressed by yeast cells, *P. pastoris* stimulated strong antibody response, but no correlation between antibody titres and infertility was observed. Similarly, when the cytokines IL-4 gene was co-immunised along with pcDNA/1300, a dramatic increase in ZP3 antibody level did not enhance the efficacy of pcDNA/1300. Indeed by driving the immune response of pcDNA/1300 towards Th2 direction, this weakened its effectiveness in preventing fertilisation.

Construct pHumoral-ZP3 was assembled as an attempt to improve the potency of pcDNA/1300. Modification of pcDNA/1300 with viral NP conjugation produced a significant enhancement on the levels of ZP3 antibody. The magnitude of the antibody response was comparable to that generated through the use of cytokine genetic adjuvant, IL-4. However, despite high ZP3 antibody titres, rats vaccinated with pHumoral-ZP3 produced normal litter size.

This study demonstrated the application of a ZP3-based DNA vaccine in fertility control. The results obtained are extremely encouraging for the development of a vaccine for lasting rat population control. Meanwhile, the current DNA construct serves as excellent model for the generation of similar vaccines to prevent individual animals from conceiving. As a result, the expensive and complicated invasive procedures like surgery and castration can be avoided.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMBINAAN VAKSIN PENCEGAH PENGHAMILAN UNTUK BIO
KAWALAN TIKUS**

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Zona palusida (ZP) adalah matriks ekstraselular yang mengelilingi oosit mamalia. ZP tikus terdiri daripada tiga glikoprotein utama: ZP1, ZP2 dan ZP3. Selaku reseptor sperma primer, ZP3 telah digunakan sebagai imunogen untuk mencegah persenyawaan ovum. Namun, protein ZP3 yang tersedia ada adalah terhad dan protein yang dituliskan tidak tersedia ada. Oleh itu, penvaksinan DNA adalah alternatif terbaik.

ZP3 cDNA telah diamplify dari ovari *R. rattus diardii* dalam langkah permulaan membangunkan vaksin DNA berasaskan ZP3. Gen ZP3 mempunyai kerangka bacaan terbuka (ORF) 1272 nucleotida yang mengkodkan polipeptida sepanjang 424 asid amino yang mana berkongsi 87% persamaan dengan homolog mencit. Vaksin polinukleotida anti-subur dihasilkan dengan menempatkan gen ZP3 ke dalam vector pengekspresan plasmid mamalia. Plasmid yang mengandungi keseluruhan jujukan gen ZP3 dinamakan pcDNA/1300. Sementara itu, binaan pcDNA/720 dan pcDNA/580 masing-masing mengandungi separuh dari bahagian gen ZP3 yang

mengkodkan terminal-N dan terminal-C. Transfeksi in-vitro sel mamalia dengan plasmid DNA ini menyebabkan ekspresi sitosol. Sperma-sperma tertarik dan terikat kepada sel yang mengandungi pcDNA/1300 dan pcDNA/580 kerana kedua-dua binaan ini mengkodkan tapak pelekatan sperma ZP3.

Pengambilan vaksin-vaksin DNA ini mengakibatkan ekspresi protein ZP3 in-vivo, seterusnya merangsangkan tindakbalas imun sel-sel khusus dan humoral menentang sel-sel yang mengandungi protein ZP3 ataupun oosit-oosit. Kekurangan atau kemusnahan sel-sel seperti ini menyebabkan penghamilan pada haiwan betina dicegah dengan berkesan. Kegagalan fungsi ovari dicirikan dengan penghabisan melampau folikel-folikel dan meningkatnya bilangan kelompok-kelompok sel oosit bebas. Integriti kebanyakan folikel ternyata dicabar oleh sel-sel imun yang menyusup masuk. Sel-sel imun khas ZP3 ini dikenalpasti sebagai campuran subset T-limfosit CD4⁺ dan CD8⁺. Perubahan dalam fungsi ovari turut dibuktikan apabila haiwan yang divaksinakan tidak lagi peka kepada ransangan hebat hormon (hCG) luar. Antara ketiga-tiga binaan, pcDNA/1300 adalah vaksin pencegah penghamilan yang paling berkesan diikuti dengan pcDNA/580. Pengurangan saiz purata anak yang dicapai oleh pcDNA/1300 adalah >90%. Ia adalah vaksin pencegah penghamilan tidak keterbalik yang bagus kerana tiada tikus-tikus yang divaksin menunjukkan tanda pulih selepas tiga kali suntikan. Sebaliknya, tikus-tikus yang divaksinakan dengan pcDNA/580 kembali subur apabila jangkamasa dilanjutkan. Dalam hal yang lain pula, penvaksinan dengan binaan pcDNA/720 tidak mempunyai sebarang kesan yang nyata terhadap kesuburan tikus. Maka, perhatian istimewa diberikan kepada pcDNA/1300.

Dalam penvaksinasi DNA, tindakbalas imun dengan perantaraan sel memainkan peranan penting sebab titer antibodi ZP3 yang dihasilkan terlalu rendah. Secara relatifnya, penvaksinasi dengan protein ZP3 rekombinan yang diekspreskan oleh sel-sel yis, *P. pastoris* merangsang tindakbalas antibodi yang kuat. Akan tetapi, tidak pula dilihat perkaitan antara titer antibodi dan ketidaksuburan. Keadaan yang sama berlaku apabila gen sitokin IL-4 diko-imunkan bersama dengan pcDNA/1300, kenaikan paras antibodi ZP3 tidak juga meningkatkan keefisyenan pcDNA/1300. Sebetulnya, tindakbalas imun pcDNA/1300 dituju ke hala Th2 telah melemahkan keperkesanannya dalam menghalang persenyawaan.

Binaan pHumoral-ZP3 dianggap dapat memperbaiki potensi pcDNA/1300. Pengubahan pcDNA/1300 dengan konjugasi virus NP ternyata sekali telah menaikkan paras antibodi ZP3. Kadar tindakbalas antibodi adalah setanding dengan penggunaan genetik adjuvant sitokin, IL-4. Tetapi, walaupun titer antibodi adalah tinggi, tikus-tikus yang diberi vaksin melahirkan saiz anak yang normal.

Kajian ini menunjukkan penggunaan vaksin DNA berdasarkan ZP3 dalam kawalan kesuburan. Keputusan yang diperolehi sangat menggalakkan dalam membangunkan vaksin untuk kawalan populasi tikus selamanya. Dalam pada itu, binaan vaksin DNA ini merupakan model yang sangat baik untuk menghasilkan vaksin yang serupa bagi mencegah individu binatang daripada mengandung. Dengan demikian, cara-cara pelanggaran yang mahal dan sulit seperti pembedahan pengembirian dapat dielakan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Associate Professor Dr. Mohd. Azmi Mohd. Lila for his constant guidance, support and invaluable advice. His encouragement was the motivation that helped me in completion of this study. A particular debt of gratitude is owe to Professor Dato' Dr. Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, Dr. Sabrina Sukardi and Dr. Rosnina Haji Yusoff for their helpful discussion and constructive comments during the course of this study. The efforts they spent to improve the quality of the thesis is very much appreciated.

I give my sincere thanks to Encik Mohd. Kamarudin Awang Isa for his excellent assistance in animal rearing and handling. To Cik Hayati Zakuria, thank you for helping me to translate the abstract into Bahasa Malaysia version.

I am grateful to all staff and friends in Virology Laboratory of for always being so willing to render assistance during my stay, and for making my time in the laboratory an enjoyable one.

I must also record my best thanks to my family for their endless support, encouragement and understanding throughout this long and demanding project. Finally, my gratitude goes to everybody who has helped or contributed in one way or another towards the completion of this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	viii
APPROVAL	ix
DECLARATION	xi
LIST OF TABLES	xv
LIST OF FIGURES	xvi
LIST OF ABBREVIATION	xx
LIST OF NOTATION	xxii
 CHAPTER	
 I INTRODUCTION	 1
 II LITERATURE REVIEW	 5
Folliculogenesis and Ovulation	5
Mammalian Fertilisation	7
Immunocontraceptive Vaccines Under Development	8
Zona Pellucida: Structure and Function	12
Primary Sperm Receptor: ZP3	14
ZP3 Gene Expression During Oogenesis	14
Structure of ZP3 Polypeptide Chain	15
Oligosaccharides of ZP3	16
Location of ZP3 Sperm-Combining Site	18
Fertility Regulation	19
ZP Glycoproteins Immunisation	19
Recombinant ZP3 Immunisation	20
ZP3 Peptides Immunisation	22
Review of Cloning and Expression of ZP3 Genes	24
DNA Vaccination	26
Mode of Administration	27
Mechanism of Antigen Presentation	30
Advantages of DNA Vaccines	32
Approaches to Optimise DNA Vaccines	33
Co-injection of Plasmid Expressing Cytokines and Co-stimulatory Molecules	33
Addition of Cytosine-Phosphate-Guanosine (CpG) Motifs	34



III	CLONING OF RAT ZP3 GENE AND CONSTRUCTION OF DNA VACCINES	
	Introduction	36
	Materials and Methods	37
	Preparation of RNA from Rat Ovaries	37
	Synthesis of ZP3 cDNA	38
	Amplification of ZP3 cDNA	39
	Cloning of ZP3 Genes into pcDNA3.1/Zeo (+)	41
	Transformation into <i>E. coli</i>	42
	Plasmid Isolation	43
	Computer-Aided Sequence Analysis	43
	Results	44
	Amplification of Rat ZP3	44
	Vaccine DNAs	44
	Sequence Analysis	45
	Discussion	54
IV	<i>IN VIVO</i> STUDIES OF RAT ZP3-DNA VACCINES AND THEIR CONTRACEPTIVE POTENTIAL	
	Introduction	59
	Materials and Methods	60
	Production of ZP3-based DNA Vaccine	60
	Expression of ZP3 Protein in Mammalian Cell Lines	61
	Sperm Binding Assay	61
	Immunisation of Rats with ZP3-based DNA Vaccines	62
	Evaluation of Fertility	63
	Histopathology Assessment of Ovaries	64
	Electron Microscopic Examination	64
	Inhibition Assay of Sperm-Zona Interaction	65
	Progesterone Assay	65
	Results	66
	Expression of ZP3 Protein in Mammalian Cell Lines	66
	Effects of DNA Vaccine on Rat Fertility	66
	Histological Assessment of Ovarian Changes	67
	Electron Microscopic Examination	68
	Effect of Rat Antisera on Sperm-Ovum Binding <i>in vitro</i>	68
	Effects of DNA Vaccination on Progesterone Concentrations	69
	Discussion	78
V	EFFECTIVENESS OF RAT ZP3-DNA VACCINES RELATIVE TO RAT ZP3-FUSION PROTEIN IN FERTILITY CONTROL	
	Introduction	85
	Materials and Methods	86
	Cloning of ZP3 cDNA into pPICZ(B) Vector	86
	Transformation into <i>E. coli</i>	87
	Linearisation of Recombinant Plasmid	87
	Preparation of Yeast Competent Cell	87
	Electroporation	88

	PCR Screening of Yeast Colonies	88
	Expression of ZP3 Fusion Protein	88
	SDS PAGE Analysis	89
	Electrophoretic transfer	90
	Western Blotting	90
	Purification of ZP3 Fusion Protein	91
	Production of Hyperimmune Serum in Mice	91
	Immunoperoxidase on Rat Oocytes	92
	Detection of Anti-ZP3 Antibodies	92
	Immunisation of Rats ZP3-Fusion Protein	93
	Fertility Trial	93
	CD4+ and CD8+ Immunostaining	94
	Results	94
	Production and Purification of ZP3 Fusion Protein	94
	Immunoperoxidase on Rat Oocytes	96
	Detection of Anti-ZP3 Antibodies	96
	Fertility Trial	96
	CD4+ and CD8+ Immunostaining	97
	Discussion	105
VI	ENHANCEMENT OF ZP3 DNA VACCINE HUMORAL IMMUNE RESPONSE BY VIRAL NUCLEOPROTEIN GENE AND IL-4 CYTOKINE	
	Introduction	112
	Materials and Methods	113
	Preparation of Newcastle Disease Viral RNA	113
	Amplification of NP Gene	113
	Construction of pHumoral plasmid	114
	Preparation of pHumoral-ZP3 and pBoost - pcDNA/1300 Mixture for Injection	115
	Immunisation of Rats	115
	Evaluation of Humoral Response to ZP3	116
	Results	116
	Construction of pHumoral-ZP3	116
	Evaluation of Humoral Response to ZP3	117
	Effects of pHumoral-ZP3 and pcDNA/1300 + pBoost on Rat Fertility	121
	Discussion	123
VII	GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	128
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
	APPENDICES	156
	BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR	166

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 List of primers used in the present study	40
1.2 ZP3 nucleotide sequence and amino acid sequence similarities between rat species and the mouse (in %)	47
2.1 The effects of recombinant ZP3 DNA vaccination on rat fertility	70
2.2 Blocking effects of antisera against ZP3-based DNA vaccines on sperm binding	76
3.1 Fertility of rats immunised with recombinant ZP3	97
4.1 Primers used to amplify NP gene of Newcastle disease virus	114

LIST OF NOTATION

List of the standard one-letter amino acid codes and their three-letter equivalents.

Amino acid	One-letter notation	Three-letters notation
Alanine	A	Ala
Arginine	R	Arg
Asparagines	N	Asn
Aspartate	D	Asp
Cysteine	C	Cys
Glutamate	E	Glu
Glutamine	Q	Gln
Glycine	G	Gly
Histidine	H	His
Isoleucine	I	Ile
Leucine	L	Leu
Lysine	K	Lys
Methionine	M	Met
Phenylalanine	F	Phe
Proline	P	Pro
Serine	S	Ser
Threonine	T	Thr
Tryptophan	W	Trp
Tyrosine	Y	Tyr
Valine	V	Val

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.1 Schematic diagram of construction of ZP3 based DNA vaccines. The assembling of full-length (1300 bp) and partial ZP3 fragments (720 bp, 580 bp) and subsequent insertion of the DNA into a mammalian expression vector is as described in Material and Methods. Thick black blocks are landmarks of ZP3 polypeptide	41
1.2 PCR amplification of ZP3 cDNA. Lane M: 100bp marker (Fermentas), Lane 1: truncated ZP3 cDNA encoding the C-terminal fragment; Lane 2: full-length ZP3 cDNA; Lanes 3 and 4: truncated ZP3 cDNA encoding the N-terminal fragment	46
1.3 Restriction enzyme analysis. The cDNA insert was released from the 5kb vector, pcDNA when digested with <i>Hind</i> III and <i>Xba</i> I. Lane M: 1kb marker (Fermentas), Lane 1: construct pcDNA/1300; Lane 2: construct pcDNA/720 and Lane 3: construct pcDNA/580	46
1.4 Comparison of ZP3 nucleotide sequences between rat species and the mouse. The start codon (ATG) and stop codon (TAA) are in bold	48
1.5 Comparison of the primary amino acid sequence of <i>R. rattus diardii</i> ZP3 with two other rat species and mouse homologues for which ZP3 has been characterized. Dots indicate completely conserved amino acids, and potential N-linked glycosylation sites (Asn-Xaa-Ser/Thr) are underlined. The predicted 22-amino acid signal sequence is italicized and the putative sperm-combining site is in boldface	52
1.6 Hydropathy profile of <i>R. rattus diardii</i> ZP3 polypeptide chain. This profile was obtained by Kyte-Doolittle computer analysis, using a window size of 7 residues. Hydrophobic residues lie above the abscissa and hydrophilic residues lie below. Arrows indicate the hydrophobic domains: one domain is associated with the N-terminal signal sequence and two domains are associated with the C-terminal region of the polypeptide chain	53
2.1 Sperm binding assay. Panels A and B: arrows indicate binding of sperm to vero cells harbouring pcDNA/580 and pcDNA/1300. ×200. Panels C and D: normal vero cells (×100) and cells bearing pcDNA/720 (×200) do not possess sperm binding ability	71

2.2	Histology of the Rat Ovary. Panel A: rat immunised with empty pcDNA3.1 showing normal follicular development at different stages (arrows). Panel B: rat injected with pcDNA/1300 exhibiting ovarian atrophy indicated by the loss of growing and mature follicles. ×40	72
2.3	Developing follicles of rats one month after immunisation with pcDNA/1300 (B, C, E) or pcDNA/580 (D, F). Panel A: follicle of pcDNA3.1 immunised animal. Panels B to D: cc, abnormal oocyte-free cell clusters. ×200; Panels E and F: cellular infiltration in granulosa layer destroying the oocyte. ×400; Arrows indicate oocyte with cytoplasmic destruction. Zona pellucida is hardly seen	73
2.4	Panel A: normal Graafian follicle. Panel B: one month after rat is vaccinated with pcDNA/1300, inflammatory cells invading Graafian follicle towards the zona pellucida and oocyte. Note the detachment of antrum containing follicular fluid from the granulosa layer (arrows). G, granulosa cell layer; O, oocyte; ZP, zona pellucida; a, antrum. × 40	74
2.5	Electron micrographs of rat ovaries one month after immunisation with pcDNA/1300. Panel A: presence of eosinophils in the thecal layer. ×10,000 Panel B: unusual vacuolations (arrows) in the thecal layer. ×5,000	74
2.6	Photomicrographs of <i>in vitro</i> sperm-egg binding assay. Sperm binding to the ZP was examined after pre-incubating eggs in (A) pre-immune serum. Sperms remain attached to the ZP (arrow) of an unfertilised egg after a series of washes. (B) pcDNA/1300 immunised serum. A complete inhibition of sperm-zona binding is evident. ×400	75
2.7	Progesterone concentrations in rats after given 50IU hCG; s: sterile animals; if: infertile animals; f: fertile animals	77
3.1	Positive transformants confirmed by PCR amplification. M: 1kb marker	98
3.2	Expression of rat ZP3 by <i>Pichia pastoris</i> . The yeast cells were grown in BMMY medium to induce expression. Panel A shows the pattern of rat ZP3 expression. Various lanes represent M, molecular weight markers; lanes 1 to 3, induced cells at different time points: 72hrs, 48hrs, and 24hrs respectively; lane 4, un-induced cells. Panel B represents the Coomassie-stained gel of rat ZP3 purified using Probond column (Invitrogen)	99

3.3	Western blot analysis. Lanes 1-2 was incubated with anti-ZP3 polyclonal antibody obtained from rats immunised with pcDNA/1300 and lanes 3-4 was incubated with anti-his monoclonal antibody. Lanes 1 and 4: uninduced yeast lysate, lanes 2 and 3: yeast lysate after 72hrs of methanol induction	100
3.4	Western blot analysis. The blot was incubated with anti- <i>myc</i> monoclonal antibody. Lane 1: uninduced yeast lysate, lane 2: purified recombinant ZP3 protein, rec-rZP3 and lane 3: yeast lysate after 72hrs of methanol induction	100
3.5	The blot was incubated with antiserum raised against DNA vaccine, pcDNA/720. Lane 1: purified rec-rZP3 and lane 2: uninduced yeast lysate	101
3.6	Immunoperoxidase staining of rat oocytes reacted with antisera raised against (A) Freund's adjuvant as negative control (B) ZP3 fusion protein, the hyperimmune serum (C) pcDNA/1300 as positive control, sera collected one month after the last booster. Antisera used are non-diluted at 1:50	101
3.7	Immunoperoxidase staining (coloured brown) that co-localises A: CD4+ T-cells and B: CD8+ T-cells in ovarian sections of rat immunised with pcDNA/1300. (A: $\times 200$; B: $\times 100$)	102
3.8	Immunoperoxidase staining of ovarian sections from rat immunised with rec-rZP3 using A: anti-rat CD4+ monoclonal antibody. The brown stain indicates the presence of CD4+ T-cells. $\times 200$. B: anti-rat CD8+ monoclonal antibody. Negative result indicates the absence of CD8+ T-cells. $\times 100$	103
3.9	Anti-ZP3 IgG raised by intramuscular inoculation of ZP3 DNA vaccines and protein vaccine	104
4.1	Restriction enzyme analysis. Lane M: 1kb marker (Fermentas), Lane 1: the 1.3kb ZP3 gene released from construct pHumoral-ZP3 when digested with <i>EcoRI</i> and <i>XbaI</i> ; Lane 2: the 1.8kb NP gene recovered when digested with <i>HindIII</i> and <i>EcoRI</i> ; Lane 3: both the NP and ZP3 gene can be separated from pcDNA when digested with <i>HindIII</i> , <i>EcoRI</i> and <i>XbaI</i>	117
4.2	Anti-ZP3 antibody titres in rats following intramuscular injections with pcDNA/1300, pcDNA/1300 + pBoost, blank pHumoral or pHumoral-ZP3. ($n = 6$ for all groups, except $n = 7$ for pHumoral-ZP3)	119

4.3	Positive immunoperoxidase staining of rat oocytes by antisera raised against (A) pHumoral-ZP3 (B) empty pHumoral (without ZP3) as negative control (C) pcDNA/1300 as positive control, sera collected 1 month after the first injection. Antisera used were at a dilution of 1:50. (×200)	120
4.4	Photomicrographs of <i>in vitro</i> sperm-egg binding assay. Sperm bound to the ZP was examined after eggs were pre-incubated in (A) pHumoral immunised serum. Sperms stay attached to the ZP (arrow) of an unfertilised egg after a series of washes. (B) pHumoral-ZP3 immunised serum. Inhibition of sperm-zona binding is evident but the inhibition was incomplete. ×400	120
4.5	Contraceptive effects, as indicated by average litter size, in female rats after intramuscular immunisations with pBoost, mixture of pBoost and pcDNA/1300, pHumoral or pHumoral-ZP3. ($n = 6$ for all groups, except $n = 7$ for pHumoral-ZP3)	122

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	Antigen Presenting Cells
AOXI	Alcohol Oxidase I
BMGY	Buffered Glycerol-complex Medium
BMMY	Buffered Methanol-complex Medium
cDNA	Complementary Deoxyribonucleic Acid
CFA	Complete Freund's Adjuvant
CpG	Cytosine-Phosphate-Guanosine
CS-1	Cleavage Signal Protein
CTL	Cytotoxic T-lymphocytes
DAB	3'-3' Diaminobenzidine
D-MEM	D-Minimum Essential Media
EDTA	Ethylene Diamine Tetra-Acetate
ELISA	Enzyme Linked Immunosorbent Assay
FA-1	Fertilisation Antigen-1
FSH	Follicle-Stimulating Hormone
GDF-9	Growth Differentiation Factor 9
GM-CSF	Granulocyte-Macrophage Colony-Stimulating Factor
GnRH	Gonadotrophin-Releasing Hormone
hCG	Human Chorionic Gonadotropin
HCMV	Human Cytomegalovirus
HRP	Horse Raddish Peroxidase
IFA	Incomplete Freud's Adjuvant
IFN- γ	Inteferon- γ
KLH	Keyhole Limpet Hemacyanin

LDH-C ₄	Lactate Dehydrogenase C ₄
LH	Luteinising Hormone
MHC	Major Histocompatibility Complex
NGS	Normal Goat Serum
NK	Natural Killer
NP	Nucleoprotein
OD	Optical Density
PBS	Phosphate Buffered Saline
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction
PH-20	Sperm Surface Protein (with hyaluronidase activity)
PVDF	Polyvinylidene Difluoride
RNA	Ribonucleic Acid
RT-PCR	Reversed Transcript Polymerase Chain Reaction
SDS-PAGE	Sodium Dodecyl Sulphate-polyacrylamide Gel Electrophoresis
SP-10	Sperm Protein-10
Tc1	Type 1 Cytotoxic Cells
Tc2	Type 2 Cytotoxic Cells
TE	Tris-EDTA
TEM	Transmission Electron Microscopy
TGFβ	Transforming Growth Factor β
YPD	Yeast Extract Peptone Dextrose Medium
ZP	Zona Pellucida

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For many years, rats have been a persistent problem to the country. Current control methods such as trapping, shooting and poisoning are not long-term solutions because of the intrinsic capacity of rats to rapidly replace those killed. Curbing the reproductive potential of the pest therefore is a more effective way to control it. Immunocontraception is a new concept of controlling fertility by using a vaccine. It aims to trick the host's immune system into generating an immune reaction against cells or molecules that are essential for reproduction, such as hormones (egs. FSH and LH) that trigger the maturation and release of egg cells in the female or a continuous production of sperms in the male, or against the gametes themselves or against pregnancy-related hormones (eg. progesterone). If successful, this approach will effectively reduce the rat population density. It is also less costly, more humane and environmental friendly as compared to existing methods, mentioned earlier.

There are three major steps toward the development of a contraceptive vaccine: selecting a potential agent to deliver the vaccine, identifying the antigen to use in the vaccine, and ensuring that the vaccine is species-specific. In an earlier study (Lai *et al.* 1998), rat cytomegalovirus (RCMV) was identified as a suitable vehicle to carry the vaccine. A narrow host range, the capability of establishing latent and persistent infections, and having a large DNA genome are some of the main features that make this virus a promising vector for fertility-associated genes. Following the above strategies, the next mission is to isolate and characterise the relevant antigen,

reassemble it into functional vaccine and conduct studies to evaluate its efficacy before incorporating it into the delivery system.

Basically, target antigens for immunocontraception can be grouped into two categories: reproductive hormones and gamete proteins. In the present study, the latter are preferred because they are tissue-specific and non-circulatory; complications arising from an immune complex formation should not happen. Evidence to support this hypothesis is found in nature. Several clinical studies have shown the association of antibodies against sperm antigens with an otherwise unexplained infertility (Scarselli *et al.* 1973; Mettler *et al.* 1974; Ingerslev, 1981; Witkin and David, 1986). Autoantibodies against the egg protein, zona pellucida (ZP) have also been documented (Nishimoto *et al.* 1980; Buckshee and Mhaskar, 1985; Kamada *et al.* 1992) in infertile patients that otherwise appear healthy, indicating that an immunological block to fertility is prevalent in the human situation, without any side effects. The focus is finally given to egg proteins because in most species, the ova surfaces consist of only three proteins and their individual functions are well understood compared to sperm antigens.

Zona pellucida is an acellular translucent matrix that surrounds the mammalian oocytes. It serves as the docking site for initial recognition and binding of the sperm to the oocyte in a species-specific manner, induces the acrosome reaction in the zona-bound sperm, blocks polyspermy, and protects the pre-implanted blastocyst. The critical involvement of ZP in the fertilisation process, together with its tissue-specific nature, has made it one of the promising target antigens for the development of an immunocontraceptive vaccine. Molecular composition analysis has revealed

that the ZP extracellular matrix is composed of three major glycoproteins with high homology among species (Harris *et al.* 1994; Zhu and Naz, 1999). These glycoproteins have been named as ZP1, ZP2 and ZP3 based on their mobility in SDS-PAGE. In rodents, ZP3 acts as a primary sperm receptor with a specific class of O-linked oligosaccharides involved in sperm binding (Wassarman, 1990).

The use of ZP as a possible means of birth control has long been investigated. Porcine ZP has been extensively utilised in these studies due to its high availability at the abattoirs. Immunisation with porcine ZP has resulted in significant zonae antibody titres and inhibition of fertility in a number of species including rabbits (Skinner *et al.* 1984), hamsters (Hasegawa *et al.* 1992), dogs (Mahi-Brown *et al.* 1988), primates (Paterson *et al.* 1992; Bagavant *et al.* 1994), horses (Kirkpatrick *et al.* 1990, 1996) and deer (Miller *et al.* 1999, 2000). Unfortunately, rats and mice immunised with the identical immunogen remained fertile (Wood *et al.* 1981; Sacco *et al.* 1981). Hence, ‘self’ ZP is required to suppress fertility in these animals. Similar to porcine ZP, the murine ZP (mZP) has been explored in some details. The mZP3 antigens either in the form of peptides or recombinant proteins have been demonstrated to induce antibody-mediated contraception (Sacco, 1979; East *et al.* 1985; Miller *et al.* 1989; Zhang *et al.* 1997) as well as autoimmune oophoritis in mice (Rhim *et al.* 1992; Lou *et al.* 1996). In contrast, little information is available on rat ZP, particularly, its use in immunocontraception. However, based on the established knowledge of mZP, the present study has been designed to develop a special contraceptive vaccine to control the rat population. Genetic vaccination can lead to active protein production *in vivo* and induces a broad spectrum of immune responses (Ulmer *et al.* 1993; Kowalczyk and Ertl, 1999). As such, hypothetically, a